

Statement by
ASSOCIATION OF STATE AND TERRITORIAL HEALTH OFFICIALS
to Interagency Committee on Smoking and Health
May 31, 1990
"Preventing the Sale of Tobacco to Children"

The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials is made up of the chief health officials of the public health agency of each State, Territory, or Possession of the United States. ASTHO's goals include formulating and influencing sound national public health policy and serving state health departments in developing and implementing state programs and policies for the public's health and the prevention of disease. ASTHO has singled out several issues for special consideration because of their importance to public health. Tobacco-related issues have been identified as a special ASTHO concern. ASTHO is pleased to have this opportunity to share our views on the sale of tobacco to children with the Interagency Committee on Smoking and Health.

Recognizing that tobacco use is the largest cause of preventable disease in this country, public health officials are committed to policies and programs to reduce and prevent the use of tobacco. The ASTHO Committee on Tobacco or Health has published the Guide to Public Health Practice: State Health Agency Tobacco Prevention and Control Plans. The Guide is intended to assist state and local health agencies in developing their own comprehensive tobacco use and prevention plans. ASTHO also sponsored a conference earlier this year for health department officials involved in tobacco issues to improve the public health practice of tobacco prevention and control. Children and youth are a major target group for prevention activities.

The goal of tobacco-related programs must be to assure that the number of current smokers continues to decline and that no new smokers are added. Preventing non-smokers--primarily children and teenagers--from starting to smoke or chew tobacco is a different task from helping people who already use tobacco to stop.

Tobacco use starts early. Almost one-quarter of smokers start before age 16, over half by age 18, and nearly 90 percent before age 21. The age at which smoking begins has been moving down over time; a greater proportion of children are starting to smoke at an earlier age than ever before.

A comprehensive spectrum of policies is needed to address use of tobacco by children. The best way to prevent sales of tobacco to children is to keep them from even trying to buy tobacco. If children don't want to buy tobacco, then sales prevention is not an issue. Tobacco must be made unattractive to children. Education and counteradvertising are the best tools to make tobacco unattractive. Limitations on advertising and sports and other promotions sponsored by tobacco products are additional tools for keeping tobacco from becoming attractive.

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Peer influences have much to do with adolescent smoking. One survey found that ninth grade boys and girls were 15 times more likely to smoke if their best friend smoked and ninth grade boys were about 20 times more likely to use smokeless tobacco if their best friend did also. Commercial tobacco advertising, although nominally not aimed at adolescents, also exerts pressure by showing attractive people smoking in attractive settings. The message, which is not missed by young people searching for role models and an identity, is that successful, vibrant, popular adults smoke.

To counter these influences, some states have used mass media campaigns. In Minnesota, for example, the health department has developed paid advertising campaigns aimed at adolescents emphasizing the social consequences of chewing and smoking such as bad breath and tobacco-stained teeth, as well as personal consequences such as addiction and the expense of tobacco. Follow-up research has shown that children exposed to the counter-advertising have changed their attitudes about tobacco.

Tobacco companies spend billions of dollars each year to promote their product. This level of effort from the companies must have an effect on the perception of young people about the social acceptability and desirability of tobacco use. Proposals to regulate or restrict the content of tobacco advertising and to limit or prohibit the distribution of advertising are being given serious consideration. Reducing the volume and glamor of advertising would help provide some balance to the struggle for the health and mindset of young people.

Education efforts in the schools are important in preventing children from starting to use tobacco. Well designed curricula, based on research about what works, need to be widely disseminated and implemented. The trend in smoking prevention activities aimed at children has been to target increasingly younger children, now focusing on middle school and junior high school, and to use programs which address smoking motivation and ways to resist temptations.

In addition to direct advertising, tobacco companies use sponsorship of sports events and public functions as a way of keeping their brand names before the public and fostering a positive image. They also make funds available to public schools for special programs. Although the companies claim that these efforts are primarily good corporate citizenship and not intended as a form of advertising, such assertions lack credibility. As a newspaper columnist recently wrote in commenting on the controversy over a tobacco company grant to the the District of Columbia public schools, if the donor did not intend to publicize its tobacco products, it could have made the grant under the name of another non-tobacco company under its corporate umbrella.

The promoter of a sporting event, the school system starved for funds, and others who accept sponsorship and funding from tobacco companies have a dilemma. The purposes are valid and worthy, but

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they should not be coopted by tobacco companies seeking respectability. By attaching their name to good community causes, the tobacco companies divert attention from the harm that they do every day in those same communities. Additionally, the community leaders who have benefited from the "generosity" of the tobacco companies find it more difficult to speak out against the dangers of tobacco use. The free publicity and good will that tobacco sponsorship generates must be curbed.

Pricing policy is another way to keep children from buying tobacco. Young people are more affected by the price of tobacco products than other groups. Studies have shown that the demand for cigarettes by teenagers is more strongly affected by price than is the demand by adults. A few cents additional on a package of cigarettes is sufficient to discourage a young person from buying them. An increase in the federal excise tax on tobacco would have the beneficial effect of keeping many children from buying that first pack of cigarettes or chewing tobacco.

Policies to encourage aversion to tobacco or disinterest are important and the most desirable ways to prevent sales to children. But some children are still going to want to experiment or defy adult values. For these children, policies which directly address sales are needed. All but six states have laws which set a minimum age for tobacco sales. However, most of these states have no penalties for vendors who sell tobacco to underage children. Even when penalties are provided, enforcement is lax to non-existent. Studies of compliance have shown that minors can readily purchase tobacco products, regardless of the legal restriction. And if restrictions on store sales to children are ineffective, then the few restrictions on vending machine sales are laughable.

Prohibitions on sales of tobacco to children must be given a high priority. The nation has made a strong effort to restrict the sale of liquor to minors and has seen a concomitant reduction in the number of drunken driving deaths of teenagers. While much remains to be done with regard to teenage alcohol abuse and drunk driving, the high visibility given to this problem has shown results. The long term health consequences of teenage tobacco use are more devastating than those from alcohol. A much stronger effort is needed to curb tobacco sales to children and teenagers. The age for legal purchases needs to be reduced. Severe penalties must be enacted and enforced for violations by retailers. And penalties should also apply to the children themselves, not the retailers alone. Retailers must be educated about the law. They must be required to post signs about the age restrictions. Vending machines must be regulated so that children cannot circumvent the sales restrictions by turning from salespeople to machines.

Lawmakers, law enforcers, retailers, and society in general must face up to the harm that is caused by selling tobacco to children. Society needs to direct some of the outrage that society expresses to illegal drug dealers who sell to children to fight tobacco sales to children.

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